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Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the in-depth evaluation of political affairs: summary report

Summary

At its forty-fourth session, the Committee for Programme and Coordination requested the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) to undertake an in-depth evaluation of political affairs. The first report on subprogramme 1, on prevention, control and resolution of conflicts, was submitted to the Committee at its forty-sixth session. As part of phase two of the in-depth evaluation, individual evaluations of the remaining four political affairs subprogrammes and special political missions are being submitted to the Committee at its forty-seventh session. The present report assesses the entire Department of Political Affairs, which is responsible for implementing the political affairs programme, and provides a cross-cutting assessment of the Department as a whole. It does not summarize findings of the individual subprogramme and special political mission evaluation reports.

The Department of Political Affairs is fulfilling most of its core functions, and its many different clients are largely satisfied. Performance is more mixed, however, with regard to its functions supporting the prevention, control and resolution of conflicts. The Department faces several significant challenges regarding the performance of its substantive divisions and units, including insufficient knowledge management, operational guidelines and work processes. Given that increased resources are only needed at targeted levels, more efficient use of existing resources through greater staff mobility, task reallocation and resource planning would enhance performance. A complex operating environment and executive management issues,

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such as unclear roles and responsibilities and the need for strengthened coordination and communication, create further challenges to the full implementation of the Department's mandate. While steps have been taken to achieve a stronger Department-wide identity, a single unified vision that embodies a cohesive set of shared objectives and norms has been difficult to achieve. OIOS commends the Department for establishing a mediation support unit, engaging a senior adviser on mediation and launching the Peacemaker database.

OIOS makes nine recommendations to the Department:

- To conduct a strategic planning exercise in order to develop a Department-wide vision and mission statement
- To establish a framework for obtaining client feedback that is regular and systematic
- To develop a Department-wide knowledge-management strategy and system
- To develop a formal monitoring and evaluation system for the Department
- To develop a plan outlining options for greater staff mobility and more efficient task allocation in the Department
- To make an assessment to determine the needs and expectations that Department divisions and units have of the Department's executive management and to clarify roles
- To consider recasting the roles of senior leaders to clearly delegate management and administrative responsibilities
- To address current gender imbalance among senior Department staff
- To ensure that recommendations made in individual OIOS subprogramme and special political mission evaluations are followed up and implemented

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of all Department non-executive management staff;[5] a self-administered survey of all Department executive management staff;[6] and 16 interviews with executive management staff. The methodology is limited by the low response rates for the two surveys on executive management. OIOS also acknowledges that a comprehensive review of political affairs should include a full assessment of the Department's relationship with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and advice to the Secretary-General on political aspects of United Nations relations with Member States. *The review should also mention the Policy Committee and the Executive Committee on Peace and Security processes*. A full assessment of the system is, however, beyond the scope of the present report.

III. Background

4. The political affairs programme is divided into five subprogrammes which are implemented by eight divisions or units with the support of executive management. The subprogrammes are the following:

- Subprogramme 1, on prevention, control and resolution of conflict, implemented by four regional divisions (Africa I, Africa II, Americas and Europe, Asia and the Pacific)
- Subprogramme 2, on electoral assistance, implemented by the Electoral Assistance Division
- Subprogramme 3, on Security Council affairs, implemented by the Security Council Affairs Division
- Subprogramme 4, on decolonization, implemented by the Decolonization Unit
- Subprogramme 5, on the question of Palestine, implemented by the Division for Palestinian Rights

5. The Department provides executive direction for the political and substantive activities of special political missions and the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, which are funded under sections 3B and 3C of the programme budget for the biennium 2006-2007 (A/60/6 (Sect. 3)). The executive management and executive support components, together with the five subprogrammes, account for only about 13 per cent ($55.8 million) of the total proposed political affairs programme budget of $425 million for the biennium 2006-2007.[7]

6. The Department currently has 221 staff, including 133 Professional staff and 88 General Service staff.[8] It is headed by an Under-Secretary-General, supported by an Office of the Under-Secretary-General, reporting directly to the Secretary-General. Two Assistant Secretaries-General in the Department report to the Under-Secretary-General: one responsible for the Africa Regional Divisions and the

[5] The survey was conducted from December 2006 to January 2007. A total of 37 of 177 division or unit staff responded, for a 21 per cent response rate.

[6] The survey was conducted from December 2006 to January 2007. A total of 12 of 46 executive management staff responded, for a 26 per cent response rate.

[7] The bulk of programme resources are concentrated in the special political missions and the Office of the Special Coordinator, totalling $369 million.

[8] Does not include staff in special political missions and the Office of the Special Coordinator.

Security Council Affairs Division, the other responsible for the Americas and Europe and Asia and the Pacific regional divisions, the Decolonization Unit and the Division for Palestinian Rights. The executive management of the Department also includes the Executive Office, the Policy Planning Unit, the Unit for Cooperation with Regional Organizations, the Executive Committee on Peace and Security and the office for the United Nations Dialogue with the Global South.

IV. Evaluation findings

A. With the exception of functions supporting the prevention, control and resolution of conflicts, where performance is mixed, the Department is fulfilling its core functions and its clients are largely satisfied

Core functions of the Department of Political Affairs

7. The core functions of the Department of Political Affairs encompass various tasks and activities undertaken by the divisions and units implementing the five political affairs subprogrammes and the special political missions. They range from the conduct of political analyses and briefing materials for the Secretary-General to assistance to Member States in electoral matters and the provision of secretariat services and substantive support to intergovernmental bodies. They also include the publication of various documents, such as the *Repertoire of the Practice of the Security Council*, the annual report of the Security Council and the 16 working papers on the Non-Self-Governing Territories, as well as the planning and execution of intergovernmental meetings and seminars, liaison with civil society and the maintenance of various databases. OIOS acknowledges that some subprogrammes have a more limited and defined scope of activity; the regional divisions have the broadest mandate and are the only divisions delivering the core functions related to the prevention, control and resolution of conflict. Based on the findings of the individual subprogramme evaluations, OIOS concludes that most of the divisions and units, as well as envoys and sanctions committee expert groups, are successfully carrying out their core functions. The exceptions are the regional divisions, which account for almost half of the combined resources of the five subprogrammes (45.9%), but less than half of all Department staff (see A/60/6 (Sect. 3)). They face significant challenges in fully implementing their mandates regarding peacemaking and peacebuilding. OIOS acknowledges that this is partially due to an increase in mandates without a concomitant increase in resources.

Client satisfaction

8. The Department services a broad range of clients (see table 1). While client needs and expectations may vary, surveys and interviews indicate that the clients give high overall ratings to the services and output the Department provides. Similarly, United Nations and non-United Nations partners give generally good ratings to the Department's work.

Table 1
Department subprogrammes and clients

Subprogramme: implementing division/unit	*Clients*
Subprogramme 1: regional divisions	Secretary-General, Member States, General Assembly, regional organizations
Subprogramme 2: Electoral Assistance Division	Member States, United Nations and non-United Nations partner organizations
Subprogramme 3: Security Council Affairs Division	Security Council and subsidiary organs, Secretary-General
Subprogramme 4: Decolonization Unit	Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples
Subprogramme 5: Division for Palestinian Rights	Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People
Special political missions	Sanctions committees, Member States, Secretary-General

9. Indicators of successful Department performance include the relevance, quality and timeliness of its work. The indicators are largely rated positively by the Department's clients and partners. For example, electoral authorities, United Nations partners and non-governmental organizations describe the expert electoral support of the Electoral Assistance Division as essential, particularly in post-conflict countries where electoral authorities may not be able to organize elections by themselves. Moreover, interviews and surveys of Security Council members reveal that the contribution of the Security Council Affairs Division in providing timely advice on rules of procedure, precedent and protocol is critical to the effective functioning of the Council. Most Special Committee members report that the substantive advice of the Decolonization Unit is of high quality, and the members of the Palestinian Rights Committee report that their Committee has been able to fully carry out its mandated work programme with the effective support of the Division for Palestinian Rights. With regard to the regional divisions, however, while there is unanimous, deep appreciation for the hard work and dedication of regional division staff, the quality of their work is described as "mixed", ranging from very good to very poor, and OIOS observed persisting weaknesses in their information and analytical products. The evaluation of the regional divisions found that a significant effort is required to support the Executive Office of the Secretary-General with regard to the political aspects of United Nations relations with Member States, often taking the form of note-taking and the preparation of talking points. This "foreign ministry" support was found to distract the divisions from their focus on conflict-related work. OIOS observed a need for greater clarity in the delineation of conflict-

related work and Secretary-General support, and the need for a solution that could involve different sections focusing on both activities.

10. Additional indicators of successful performance by the Department are the responsiveness and expertise of its staff. Given the political environment in which the Department functions, its staff must often respond to time-sensitive and complex demands, thus necessitating relevant skills and competencies to meet them. Subprogramme evaluations for the Electoral Assistance Division, the Security Council Affairs Division, the Decolonization Unit and the Division for Palestinian Rights highlight overall satisfaction with staff responsiveness and expertise, and the technical expertise and knowledge of their staff are considered to be primary resources of the Department, by both its clients and its partners. In the case of the regional divisions, the assessed rating of staff knowledge and expertise was mixed, similar to the assessment of the quality of the divisions' work.

B. The Department faces several significant challenges with regard to the performance of its substantive divisions and units

Knowledge management

11. OIOS notes that knowledge is one of the Department's primary resources and crucial to the effective implementation of its mandate (see para. 10 above). It encompasses technical expertise on substantive issues, political acumen, institutional memory on precedent, protocol and procedure, and a wealth of personal experience. OIOS observes, however, that in most divisions and units, there is a lack of adequate mechanisms and tools for capturing, storing, sharing and disseminating knowledge. In addition, no systems exist to fully integrate the knowledge into the daily work activities of staff members, nor is much of the knowledge documented. For example, the system currently used by the Electoral Assistance Division to capture, store and share the Division's experience in electoral matters in various political contexts and countries is inadequate. In the Security Council Affairs Division, information-management systems for storing and retrieving data on lessons learned, precedent and procedure and other substantive issues are not sufficient. The Decolonization Unit also lacks any knowledge-management system, and the best practices and lessons learned of special political missions are similarly not captured. OIOS observes that, in some divisions and units, knowledge is concentrated in a few individuals, with significant risk of losing that knowledge when those individuals leave or transfer.

12. OIOS observes that information-sharing and dissemination of knowledge across divisions and units, or between special political missions, is limited. For example, the regional divisions do not consistently share their knowledge of good practices and lessons learned with others, and staff in the Division for Palestinian Rights also lack mechanisms for the systematic sharing of information on the question of Palestine with their colleagues in the Department. Staff interviews and surveys also show that information is not consistently shared between executive management offices and the divisions or units that they support. To address those concerns, a dedicated Department-wide knowledge-management section could be considered.

Operational guidelines

13. OIOS furthermore notes that most divisions and units either lack or have insufficient operational guidelines for day-to-day activities and tasks; consequently, Department staff often rely on their own individual methods for performing their work. For example, the Decolonization Unit lacks guidelines documenting its internal work processes. In the Security Council Affairs Division, guidelines exist for some but not all key products and processes. OIOS notes that such guidelines are needed to ensure consistency and credibility in the Department's work. Well-developed, clear guidelines also facilitate greater timeliness and quality of the Department's services and output. Regional division staff employ inconsistent methods to collect and analyse quality political information, and Electoral Assistance Division staff rely on individual judgement rather than written guidelines and criteria when reviewing requests for electoral assistance.[9] *The Department of Political Affairs states that it has developed tools and guidelines to conduct political analysis, however desk officers do not receive sufficient training in the tools. While the proposed handbook for political affairs officers will supplement resources in that regard, officers must still be provided with adequate mentoring and support as political analysis is a cumulatively acquired skill. The Department also points out that it is preparing the handbook, to be available online, with existing human resources.*

Work processes

14. Given the highly variable yet time-critical demands for many Department services, well-developed and effective work processes are essential to enhance the Department's efficiency. In its individual subprogramme evaluations, OIOS notes that enhanced work processes are needed to improve the efficiency of the Department's work, including better guidelines and communication systems, strengthened coordination mechanisms and streamlined work operations.

Monitoring and evaluation

15. OIOS also notes that the Department and its individual divisions and units lack a robust monitoring and evaluation system for assessing their work. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation would institutionalize a more reflective process by which the Department can monitor its own performance, with a view to learning and refining work processes and structures to better meet performance indicators, while also strengthening staff and management accountability for their performance and results. A built-in monitoring and evaluation function would also help the Department to track its mandate compliance in a more formal, systematic and transparent manner.

[9] OIOS acknowledges that the Department of Political Affairs often lacks first-hand information owing to insufficient resources to make field visits and therefore relies on the triangulation of secondary data resources.

C. While targeted resource increases are necessary, there is room for more efficient use of existing resources through enhanced staff mobility, task reallocation and resource planning

Targeted resource increases

16. OIOS recognizes that isolated resource constraints are an obstacle to the effectiveness of several of the Department's divisions and units. In the Security Council Affairs Division, OIOS notes that the growth in sanctions committees has not been met with a corresponding resource increase in the Division branch supporting those committees. Special political missions have increased exponentially over a 10-year period without a concomitant increase in resources for backstopping and oversight by Headquarters. One constraint identified by OIOS as hampering the work quality of regional divisions is the lack of staff and resource allocations commensurate with expanding mandates and demand; desk officers cannot adequately follow developing events around the world because they lack adequate time for monitoring, research and analytical work. On average, regional divisions are able to focus on fewer than half of the countries in conflict, or potentially in conflict that should be receiving coverage, and they provide only limited substantive support and attention to some of the special political missions. Although there are certain management and technological initiatives that can be taken using current resources to address some of the problematic areas of work, there is a limit to what such initiatives could achieve. OIOS believes that greater resources would be necessary to more effectively meet the broad mandates of regional divisions.

17. The travel budget of the Department of Political Affairs is limited; for the biennium 2006-2007, it is $1,369,200. That sum includes travel for 57 desk officers in regional divisions, the other political affairs officers in the remaining divisions or units, the Assistant Secretaries-General and the Under-Secretary-General. Urgent travel needs are therefore given priority over more routine, but equally important, staff travel, given that field travel is essential to the political work conducted by much of the Department, especially with regard to developing and implementing conflict-prevention strategies. For example, a Department senior staff member estimates that, on average, desk officers travel to their assigned countries once every four years.

18. A lack of resources also affects the Department's executive management. At the 2005 World Summit, Member States requested the creation of a mediation support office in the Department using existing resources. Following the recent restructuring of the Policy Planning Unit, the mediation support mandate has been added to that office's functions, posing additional constraints to already scarce resources. OIOS notes that Unit officers have too many portfolios to handle their work efficiently, and that the Unit's work has therefore focused mostly on the mediation support mandate. To address the problem, the Department recently obtained approval for three additional posts for the policy planning mandate, and plans to request more posts for the mediation support team. Interviews with Department staff reveal that existing Executive Office resources are also insufficient. Currently, the Executive Office has 3 Professional posts (one P-5, one P-4 and one P-2) and 12 General Service posts. OIOS observes a clear lack of

balance in the General Service to Professional staff ratio for the office.[10] Executive Office Professional staff describe morale in their office as low, owing to the high volume of work. Some staff also report that tasks are not fairly allocated and that some General Service staff members must perform duties at the Professional level.

Staff mobility and task reallocation

19. Staff resources could be better integrated by developing formal structures and mechanisms for the rotation of staff on an ad hoc temporary and/or cyclical basis to other parts of the Department, as well as by reallocating tasks among divisions and units to make more efficient use of staff time. More formal exchanges would help Department staff capitalize on their complementarities and strengthen their professional opportunities, creating enhanced professional connections and more widespread information-sharing networks. A higher level of staff mobility across divisions would also foster a unified vision for the Department. For example, in recognition of the fact that the workload of the Decolonization Unit is more concentrated in the first half of the year, informal arrangements have been developed whereby the Unit and certain regional divisions help each other in their work assignments. The results of this work arrangement have been positive, enhancing the integration of the Unit within the Department, optimizing staff resources and facilitating the exchange of information, knowledge and expertise among Department staff, without any adverse effect on the Unit's capacity to meet its core functions to support the Special Committee. OIOS also acknowledges that staff mobility between Headquarters and the field, although difficult to achieve without a strong field presence, and between the Department of Political Affairs and other departments, including the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, would also be beneficial. OIOS notes that attention paid to career development also enhances staff performance.

Resource planning

20. OIOS furthermore notes that strategic planning on how to use newly acquired assets is also crucial for the Department's efficient use of resources. For example, while a Turner Foundation grant assigned $1.9 million to the United Nations Dialogue with the Global South project that has benefited the Department, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, interviews with executive management staff indicate that no planning has been done to date on how the newly acquired resources, knowledge and contacts will be used by the Department. Better resource planning could also be achieved in some cases through faster filling of permanent vacancies, more efficient allocation of tasks within divisions and units, and the delegation of some activities, both from more senior- to junior-level Professional staff within divisions or units and from executive management to divisions and units. For example, two executive management staff members suggest that talking points and the approval of cables are directly signed off by division directors rather than by executive management staff.

21. OIOS notes that the Department has made considerable efforts in the area of advocacy to increase its financial resources. Member States have been responsive to these requests, and the Department has recently raised $2 million for mediation

[10] This is above the average Secretariat ratio of 1.36 General Service posts to 1 Professional post proposed for the biennium 2006-2007 (A/60/6 (Introduction), para. 22).

support through voluntary contributions and $650,000 since 2000 for its Trust Fund for Updating the *Repertoire of the Practice of the Security Council*. While some executive management staff members believe that more could and should be done in this area, others believe that financial support for the Department should not be based on voluntary contributions, but on a regular and sustainable budget, since voluntary contributions only provide a temporary solution.

22. While the Department has made efforts to improve transparency in the use of its 10 trust funds, administration of the funds is not fully efficient or flexible.[11] The Department has appointed a focal point for donor relations and coordination of trust funds, who has played an important role in the establishment of guidelines to evaluate trust fund projects. However, OIOS notes that the focal point works only with the two largest trust funds and on a part-time and temporary basis. Also, the partnership between the Executive Office, which has administrative responsibility for trust funds, and the focal point has not been adequately clarified. The administrative process following project submission is lengthy.

D. The Department's complex operating environment poses further challenges to the full implementation of its mandate

Mandate relevance

23. The mandate of the Department of Political Affairs encompasses a broad range of objectives directly corresponding to the focus areas of its five subprogrammes and special political missions. For some divisions and units, mandate relevance emanates directly from the General Assembly, as is the case with the Decolonization Unit and the Division for Palestinian Rights, since each supports a committee whose existence and work programme are renewed annually by a General Assembly resolution. Similarly, envoys are appointed when the Secretary-General deems conditions conducive to bringing his good offices to bear on preventive diplomacy and peacemaking, or when the Security Council establishes a sanctions regime that requires an expert group to monitor and report on sanction violations. For other subprogrammes, mandate relevance is underpinned by ongoing, and often growing, demand for assistance generated by global political, economic and social developments. Thus, the increasing number of intra-State conflicts has created the need for continued preventive and peacebuilding expertise on the part of the regional divisions, while a steady upward trend in Member State requests for electoral assistance has warranted continued assistance by the Electoral Assistance Division. As regards the Security Council Affairs Division, a steady expansion in the activities of the Security Council and subsidiary organs has led to ever-greater demand for its support. OIOS also notes that, in both surveys and interviews,

[11] The trust funds are: (a) the Trust Fund in Support of Special Missions and Other Activities related to Preventive Diplomacy and Peacemaking; (b) the United Nations Trust Fund for Electoral Observation; (c) the Trust Fund for Negotiations to Find a Comprehensive Settlement of the Georgian/Abkhaz Conflict; (d) the Trust Fund in Support of the Activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in Guinea-Bissau; (e) the Trust Fund for Updating the *Repertoire of the Practice of the Security Council*; (f) the Trust Fund for Peacebuilding in Somalia; (g) the Trust Fund in Support of the Activities of the Secretary-General's Special Representative to the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa; (h) the Trust Fund for Preventive Action; (i) the Trust Fund to support the Distinct Entity Created to Provide Security for the United Nations Presence in Iraq; and (j) the United Nations Fund for International Partnerships.

Division staff, clients and partners all attest to the relevance of the mandates of Department subprogrammes and special political missions.

24. Department subprogramme mandates range from the relatively specific to the broad. Some subprogrammes, such as decolonization and the question of Palestine, are more focused on specific tasks and outputs; other subprogramme mandates are broad, to give implementing divisions and units the flexibility to adjust to changes in their work environment. The very same mandate breadth, however, sometimes makes implementation challenging, owing to a lack of clear and precise parameters to guide the divisions and units in their programme of work.

Political intricacies

25. The Department faces a range of complexities in its operating environment that pose challenges to its ability to fully implement its mandate. In keeping with the Department's explicit focus on political affairs, all its subprogrammes navigate a range of political intricacies. In their efforts to prevent and resolve conflict, special political missions operate in a highly charged environment requiring diplomatic tact in communicating with a range of parties. The Decolonization Unit and the Division for Palestinian Rights deal with political issues marked by strong, and frequently divergent, views in the international community and among Member States. Everyday, the Security Council Affairs Division must facilitate the deliberations and decision-making of the Security Council and its subsidiary organs, even though Council members may disagree on the means by which to maintain peace and security. The Electoral Assistance Division must gain the trust and cooperation of the various opposing factions if its electoral assistance efforts are to be successful, while the regional divisions must take into account the full range of political sensitivities in conducting their analyses and sharing their reports.

26. In order to effectively negotiate these political intricacies, staff must remain updated, on a continuous basis and in an ever-changing environment, on prevailing analytical frameworks, issues, history and political developments governing their work. For some subprogrammes, substantive expertise is explicitly stated in the mandate itself. While the Department has largely managed the demands of working in a politically complex environment, in some cases there is a need for greater professional development in core aspects of its work. For instance, interviews with staff in the regional divisions, a primary source of in-depth regional political analyses in the Secretariat, reveal a need for strengthening analytical frameworks and methods in order to make those analyses more useful.

Topical overlaps

27. Three additional layers of complexity have posed equal challenges to the full implementation of the Department's mandate. One concerns the topical overlaps that exist between the Department itself and other United Nations entities, such as between the regional divisions and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, where there are complex overlaps between the different phases of peace operations, and between the Electoral Assistance Division and the United Nations Development Programme, where each has a role in the provision of electoral assistance.[12] Such

[12] OIOS notes that such overlap challenges stem from the fact that many global issues of which the United Nations is seized are inherently multifaceted.

overlaps require a clear and efficient division of labour, with precisely defined roles and responsibilities. The regional division evaluation notes that, while they have made good efforts to strengthen partner relationships, most of these relationships remain fragile and are not institutionalized, thereby posing risks to their long-term durability. In particular, the relationship between the regional divisions with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations was noted as problematic, albeit improving.

Divergent client expectations

28. The second layer of complexity is the divergent expectations of some division or unit clients. This is less relevant for the Electoral Assistance Division, whose client expectations are more coherent and consistent, but more relevant for the regional divisions, the Security Council Affairs Division, the Decolonization Unit, the Division for Palestinian Rights and some special political missions. While their primary client is a single United Nations body, individual clients within that body often have different and even conflicting support needs and expectations, which sometimes differ fundamentally. Some clients urge the Department of Political Affairs to be more innovative, proactive or substantive in its mandate implementation, while others prefer a more conservative role for the Department. In these divisions and units, there is a need to better understand clients' and partners' expectations, particularly given that the Department lacks a regular feedback mechanism by which to assess and address client needs. OIOS notes that the need to clearly understand client needs and expectations is particularly acute in the Department, given the intensely political nature of its work.

Time-sensitive environment

29. The third layer of complexity is created by the highly time-sensitive environment in which the Department must sustain its effectiveness. For example, the regional divisions must conduct accurate and reliable political analyses often at very short notice, and the Security Council Affairs Division must be constantly prepared to meet the frequently changing needs of the Security Council.

E. Increased clarity of executive management roles and functions, as well as strengthened communication and coordination with substantive Department divisions and units, would also enhance the Department's performance

Executive management assessment

30. As stated in the programme of work for 2006-2007, the objective of Department executive management is to ensure full implementation of legislative mandates and compliance with United Nations policies and procedures with respect to the management of the programme of work and of staff and financial resources. Department staff interviews and survey data indicate an overall positive assessment of the work conducted by the Department management.[13] Staff morale in the Department has improved somewhat, largely owing to changes adopted by the most

[13] OIOS notes that this evaluation was conducted during the tenure of the former Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

recent senior leadership, which was generally considered to be inclusive and to communicate effectively with staff. OIOS notes that these positive changes will need to be continued for staff morale to be improved further. The quality of work of the main executive management offices is generally assessed well by Department staff with an opinion (see table 2). However, the fact that many staff members do not have an opinion on the offices of the Assistant Secretaries-General may indicate less familiarity with what those offices do and their relevance to staff's own work.[14]

Table 2
Department division/unit staff assessments of executive management offices

	Staff rating			
Office	*Excellent/ good*	*Fair*	*Poor/ very poor*	*No opinion*
Office of the Under-Secretary-General	73%	19%	3%	5%
Office of the Assistant Secretary-General with responsibilities for Africa I and Africa II Divisions and the Security Council Affairs Division	42%	14%	3%	41%
Office of the Assistant Secretary-General with responsibilities for the Americas and Europe Division, the Asia and the Pacific Division, the Division for Palestinian Rights and the Decolonization Unit	54%	16%	3%	27%
Policy Planning Unit	33%	22%	3%	42%

Executive management roles and responsibilities

31. Despite an overall positive assessment, however, OIOS notes ways in which the work of executive management can be improved. First of all, OIOS notes a serious vulnerability with regard to the lack of a central management team or function; current management responsibilities are spread throughout the Department. There is also a lack of clarity on how work is distributed among different executive management offices; staff indicate that the current division of labour is largely conducted on an ad hoc basis. For example, even though the Policy Planning Unit is responsible for the Department's cross-cutting issues, both the Office of the Under-Secretary-General and the offices of the Assistant Secretaries-General have also been made responsible for a number of those issues. In addition, several executive management staff members acknowledge the existence of some duplication between the Office of the Under-Secretary-General and the offices of the Assistant Secretaries-General, such as the provision of advice to the Secretary-General. This duplication has occasionally resulted in lack of coordination, such as when the Under-Secretary-General has contacted a division director on a sensitive issue without first going through the Assistant Secretary-General. While OIOS acknowledges that some duplication is inevitable and even necessary to ensure the quality of information reaching both the Secretary-General and the Under-Secretary-General, it can lead to inefficiency. For example, some Department staff express frustration over excessive review layers between desk officers and the Under-

[14] OIOS acknowledges that staff not directly reporting to the office of an Assistant Secretary-General are less likely to be familiar with its work.

Secretary-General, which in their view creates unnecessary delays in urgent matters requiring political analysis or advice.

32. The lack of clarity also affects senior official roles. OIOS notes a need to clarify the role of the Assistant Secretaries-General to better support the work of the divisions and units, since it has often been left to the individuals occupying those posts to interpret what their role entailed.[15] Currently, the offices of the two Assistant Secretaries-General play somewhat different roles, one taking on more thematic cross-cutting and management issues than the other. With regard to the Under-Secretary-General's role, OIOS notes that his or her responsibilities leave little time to devote to daily management. Some executive management staff members suggest that one of the two Assistant Secretaries-General be assigned exclusive administrative and personnel management responsibilities for the Department. *The Department believes that the role of the Assistant Secretaries-General should be enhanced and clearly defined in support of the Under-Secretary-General's dual role of chief administrator and the political head of the Department and that regular meetings between the Under-Secretary-General and the Assistant Secretaries-General on management and political issues should be institutionalized.*

Coordination and communication

33. OIOS notes that efforts have been made to increase coordination among executive management and the divisions and units. Several executive management staff members favourably note the approach adopted by the former Under-Secretary-General in becoming more directly involved in the work of the divisions and units. Daily meetings between the Under-Secretary-General, the Assistant Secretaries-General, the Executive Office, the Policy Planning Unit and division and unit directors to coordinate and exchange information are also considered very useful. Attempts are also being made to enhance coordination between the Policy Planning Unit and the rest of the Department. They include daily meetings with the division and unit directors, "brown bag" events, and the establishment of focal points in all divisions and units for the different issues for which the Unit is responsible. OIOS supports continued efforts such as those to enhance coordination in the Department. Department staff interviews and surveys also indicate that stronger coordination and communication between the Office of the Under-Secretary-General and the Executive Office of the Secretary-General is required.

34. With regard to the Executive Office, there are divergent expectations among Department staff members regarding the role it should play. For example, the respective administrative support roles played by the Executive Office and the Security Council Affairs Division with regard to expert groups have yet to be sufficiently defined. In order to alleviate its high workload, the Executive Office has appointed administration and finance focal points in all Department divisions and units to which particular administrative and financial responsibilities are delegated. Although OIOS notes some resistance to the delegation of work, the new system contributes to the integration and coordination of the Department's work and incorporates a substantive perspective to administrative issues and decisions. OIOS believes that the involvement of substantive divisions and units in budget

[15] One executive management staff member explained that the role of the Assistant Secretary-General was often dependent upon his or her personal relationship with the Under-Secretary-General.

formulation, preparation of the strategic framework and other administrative matters is beneficial to overall performance, as long as it does not detract from their substantive work.

Senior staff gender ratios

35. Finally, OIOS notes that there are currently fewer female director-level staff members than there were in December 2005.[16] Increased efforts are needed to ensure gender balance in the Department, particularly at the senior level.

F. A single unified Department vision has been difficult to achieve

Obstacles

36. The Department faces a number of obstacles to achieving a unified vision that embodies a cohesive set of shared objectives and norms. The chief obstacle is the lack of an overarching departmental mission that unifies the individual subprogrammes and the special political missions. OIOS sees the Department's mission as one of providing independent, timely and credible political analysis, expertise and substantive support to its various clients throughout the Organization. OIOS notes that a universal sense of shared purpose among the Department's divisions and units is somewhat lacking. Half of staff survey respondents (53%) agree that executive management has been effective in providing a clearly articulated vision and strategy for the Department, but one third (31%) disagree.[17] In interviews, some staff members say that they are not sure how their division or unit fits into the larger Department, or report feeling isolated from their colleagues in the Department.

37. Interviews and surveys of staff members also reveal some concern about the lack of a common thread uniting the Department. Thus, whereas a majority of respondents to the staff survey (70%) see a clear link between their own work and the Department's objectives and mandate, a sizeable minority (30%) do not. The manifold complexities that the Department confronts on a daily basis further contribute to difficulties in uniting the Department under a common identity. Some staff members have to focus their attention on meeting their own subprogramme mandates rather than on wider and broader departmental issues and priorities.

38. The difficulty in achieving a shared departmental vision has concrete implications for the implementation of the Department's workplan. Although staff members tend to describe the quality of their professional relationships with colleagues in other divisions or units in generally positive terms, data gleaned from staff interviews and surveys indicate relatively infrequent interaction between them. This isolation is particularly detrimental to mandate implementation in cases where heightened interaction might enhance Department-wide efficiency, for example, by reducing duplication and helping subprogrammes to exploit complementarities that exist between and among them (see para. 19 above). For example, political analyses by regional divisions could benefit colleagues in other divisions and units, and the

[16] In December 2005, there were three women at the D-2 level and four women at the D-1 level. Since then, two have left and been replaced by men and three are currently being replaced through the Galaxy system.

[17] The remaining 16 per cent of respondents neither agree nor disagree.

institutional memory of the Security Council Affairs Division of precedent and procedure in the Security Council could be more widely harnessed to inform colleagues' work. Furthermore, the Division for Palestinian Rights is a source of information and knowledge on the question of Palestine, but its expertise is not typically integrated into the work of the regional division dealing with the same geographical region. While the Department's divisions and units have embarked on individual initiatives to strengthen their interconnectivity, existing linkages are often not institutionalized.

39. The lack of a single unified vision extends to the subprogramme level as well.[18] For some division or unit staff members, this translates into disparate interpretations of the role of their division or unit, or a difference of perspective on how proactive or innovative they should be in defining their workplan or interacting with clients. OIOS acknowledges that executive management exercises more limited control over the development of a shared vision at the division or unit level, since these areas fall more directly under the purview of division or unit managers themselves. However, OIOS notes some areas in which executive management might enhance these efforts, including more explicit and consistent support for division or unit management's vision-building. Department staff do not consistently agree that executive management has been effective in providing a clearly articulated vision and strategy for their individual subprogramme. Among staff members surveyed, only 28 per cent of respondents agree with this sentiment, while 39 per cent disagree.[19]

Recent steps

40. OIOS notes that executive management has recently attempted to foster a shared vision, but more can be accomplished. In 2006, six town hall meetings were held with all staff, at which an attempt was made to clearly articulate a vision and strategy for the Department. Also, in January 2006, a 2-day retreat attended by staff of all divisions and units was held to revitalize the Department and realign its priorities. A vision with four focus areas was developed, and communicated to staff members through newsletters, e-mails and a brochure.[20] OIOS commends those efforts. However, there is a need for more proactive executive management in facilitating integration among the divisions and units and in articulating and fostering a shared departmental vision. In interviews, Department staff members report a recent movement towards greater interaction among the divisions and units. The institutionalization of daily meetings of all directors and chiefs represents one such initiative. Some divisions and units, moreover, have welcomed the former Under-Secretary-General's commitment to help them convey the usefulness of the work of their individual division or unit to colleagues throughout the Department. OIOS notes, however, that executive management's involvement in those initiatives has largely been at the behest of the divisions and units themselves.

[18] OIOS acknowledges that divisions and units have disparate roles and mandates which make the creation of a single vision challenging.

[19] The remaining 33 per cent of respondents neither agree nor disagree.

[20] The focus areas are political analysis; peacemaking and preventive diplomacy; electoral assistance; and servicing of the Security Council and other United Nations bodies.

V. Conclusion

41. As the Department charged, inter alia, with supporting the primary purpose of the Organization — the maintenance of international peace and security — the Department of Political Affairs has been given complex and difficult mandates to fulfil. OIOS commends the Department for its achievements in the past year of establishing a mediation support unit, engaging a senior adviser on mediation and launching the Peacemaker database, a comprehensive knowledge management tool for preventive diplomacy. Despite the complexity and difficulty of its tasks, the Department is effectively fulfilling many of its core functions, and many of its clients are largely satisfied with the services and the output it provides. The mixed performance and shortcomings in the critical areas of support to peacemaking and peacebuilding must be addressed as a matter of priority. Executive management has an important role to play in this regard, but could do more to facilitate the work of the Department. While individual mandates of subprogrammes and special political missions are clear and relevant, the complex environment in which the Department operates creates important challenges that must be overcome to maximize performance. Additional challenges to the effective functioning of the Department include the difficulty in achieving a single unified vision among its different divisions and units, and the lack of organized and systematic knowledge-management systems and operational guidelines. With regard to the Department's resources, targeted increases are not the only solution; what is also needed is more efficient utilization of existing resources. OIOS notes that the arrival of a new Under-Secretary-General and other recent leadership changes in the Department offer an opportunity for further enhancements to strengthen the Department of Political Affairs and achieve greater impact.

VI. Completion of the political affairs evaluation

42. In order to fulfil its mandate to conduct an in-depth evaluation of political affairs, OIOS plans to conduct an evaluation of the third group of special political missions that have not yet been the subject of evaluation (see footnote 3). The group includes 10 entities consisting of field missions located in various countries with a mandate in peacebuilding and other political areas. OIOS intends to submit a report on the third group of special political missions to the Committee for Programme and Coordination at its forty-eighth session in 2008.

VII. Recommendations

43. On the basis of the findings of the present cross-cutting assessment of the Department of Political Affairs, OIOS makes the recommendations as set out below. *The Department states that findings on the regional divisions were made available to the Controller's office, but were not sufficient to provide for additional budget allocations for the period 2008/09. Without additional resources, the Department will be hard-pressed to implement a thorough strategic review, or implement the large number of innovative initiatives suggested in the report, such as the implementation of a monitoring and evaluation framework, a client feedback mechanism, a knowledge-management framework, or reviews of work processes.* OIOS recognizes that resources will be requested in the context of the 2010-2011

budget cycle, which will start in the third quarter of 2008, but believes that steps can be taken before then to initiate implementation of these recommendations.

Recommendation 1

44. **Taking into account the findings highlighted in recent OIOS evaluations and audits, the Department should conduct a strategic planning exercise in order to develop a clearer Department-wide vision and mission statement.** OIOS commends the work undertaken by the former Under-Secretary-General in identifying Department focus areas (see para. 40 above). The mission statement should articulate a cohesive set of shared objectives and norms. All divisions and units and staff levels in the Department should be involved in this exercise. It should include an assessment of possible structural changes to achieve the Department's mission, including the possible division of responsibilities for conflict-related work and Secretary-General support.

Recommendation 2

45. **The Department should develop a Department-wide knowledge-management strategy and system for more effectively capturing, storing, sharing and integrating knowledge across divisions and units and executive management.** The strategy and system should build upon individual knowledge-management initiatives being undertaken at the division and unit level. It should include a mapping of knowledge needs and sources across the Department, the development of tools and systems to capture existing knowledge and share it with those who need it, and mechanisms for integrating knowledge into staff's day-to-day work. OIOS suggests that the Policy Planning Unit take the lead on this initiative.

Recommendation 3

46. **To ensure more efficient use of existing resources, the Department should develop a plan that outlines options for staff mobility within the Department and task reallocation between divisions and units, wherever the need is greatest.** This could include ad hoc staff rotation between divisions and units on a temporary and/or cyclical basis, as well as cross-division work teams. *The Department believes that better use of staff as a resource would be one way of addressing more efficient use of existing resources, but addressing the imbalance of the travel budget, for example, can be resolved only through resource increase.*

Recommendation 4

47. **The Department should consider recasting the roles of senior leaders in the Department so that Department management and administrative responsibilities are clearly delegated to one or more key individuals with primary responsibility and accountability for day-to-day operations of the Department.**

Recommendation 5

48. **The Department should establish a framework for obtaining client feedback that is regular and systematic.** The framework would include guidelines and instruments for collecting client feedback data, as well as systems for storing and using the data obtained to improve work performance. It would be adapted at the division or unit level as appropriate.

Recommendation 6

49. **The Department should develop a formal Department-wide monitoring and evaluation system.** The system should feature mechanisms and tools for regular internal assessment of the Department's performance.

Recommendation 7

50. **The executive management of the Department should undertake a needs assessment to determine the expectations and support requirements of the Department's substantive offices and units.** On the basis of the assessment, executive management offices should develop clear guidelines and policies for better supporting the Department, spelling out respective roles and responsibilities and outlining communication and coordination processes. They should be clearly communicated to all staff members. This exercise should be undertaken in coordination with individual division and unit change-management exercises. It should also specifically address ways in which to strengthen the Executive Office.

Recommendation 8

51. **The Department should address the current gender imbalance among senior staff in the Department.** This might include an internal leadership-development programme that identifies and trains female staff members for high-level positions in the Department.

Recommendation 9

52. **The Department leadership should ensure that the recommendations made in individual OIOS subprogramme and special political mission evaluations are appropriately followed up and implemented in a coordinated and strategic manner.**

Recommendations to individual Department divisions and units

53. OIOS also makes 40 recommendations to Department divisions and units and special political missions. The 10 regional division recommendations were endorsed by the Committee for Programme and Coordination at its forty-sixth session in 2006. The remaining 30 recommendations are made in the individual subprogramme evaluation reports, which are being submitted to the Committee as addenda to the

present report. OIOS requests that the Committee consider and endorse those recommendations in its deliberations of the individual Department subprogramme evaluation reports.

(*Signed*) Inga-Britt **Ahlenius**
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